

Florida's Wildlife management areas offer accessible features for mobility-impaired visitors

By Liz Sparks

Photographs by Hugh McArthur



Visitors of all ages can enjoy the views provided by ADA-accessible wildlife blinds at Andrews WMA.

Andrews Wildlife Management Area (WMA) near Fanning Springs in North Central Florida, is a 3,500-acre shady oasis of mature upland hardwood forest bordering the Suwannee River. Andrews is an excellent location for wildlife viewing, best suited for visits in fall, winter and spring. Visitors should stop at the entrance kiosk upon arrival to pick up a bird list and recreation guide with a map of the area roads and hiking trails. Driving on Andrews' winding roads, bordered by food plots and bat houses, frequently rewards nature lovers with an opportunity to see turkey, deer and wild hogs.

An Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA)-accessible wildlife viewing blind also offers visitors a chance to view wildlife and numerous species of birds. A wheelchair or walker can easily be maneuvered inside the blind and a comfortable bench tempts nature lovers to linger. Andrews also features an inviting picnic shelter, overlooking the scenic Suwannee River with an ADA-accessible parking pad and picnic table. From the river bank in spring and summer months, some lucky visitors may see, or at least hear, large Gulf sturgeon leaping and splashing in the river.

Well-marked hiking trails lead to three of Florida's champion tree specimens (the largest of their kind in the state). The area is closed during hunting days, and a calendar of hunting dates is posted at the entrance kiosk and available online at MyFWC.com/recreation/andrews/whentovisit.asp.

Babcock Webb Wildlife Management Area, near Punta Gorda, with 65,000 acres of outstanding wildlife habitats, is one of the few remaining expanses of natural landscape in rapidly urbanizing Southwest Florida. Babcock Webb's expansive vistas offer good opportunities for wildlife viewers on a scenic driving

tour, particularly in the early morning and evening. White-tailed deer, alligators and wild hogs often can be spotted. Watch and listen for red-shouldered hawks, northern bobwhites, ground doves and eastern meadowlarks. A good selection of Florida's wading birds, including sandhill cranes, ibis, egrets and herons, may be spotted in the open, marshy edges of Webb Lake, and in wetlands throughout the area.

During hunting season (approximately mid-October through mid-January), the entire area is open to vehicle access. At other times of the year, vehicles must use only designated roads in the recreation area. A short, scenic driving tour, near the entrance, along the western border of Webb Lake, features interpretive signs and shady picnic areas. For more information and hunting dates visit this Web site: MyFWC.com/recreation/babcock_webb/whentovisit.asp

Babcock Webb WMA also offers an ADA-accessible section at the popular shooting range. Rifle, shotgun and pistol positions are available. Primitive camping sites are being upgraded to meet ADA standards and are open during hunting season and on weekends.

Fishing also is popular on Webb Lake. Stocked freshwater fish often reach record proportions, although catch and release is the rule. Three boat ramps allow access to the lake by canoe, kayak or other non-motorized vessels. Bank fishing is popular in three small ponds on either side of Tucker Grade near the area's entrance.

Everglades WMA has a newly constructed overlook that provides a gentle climb up a 130-foot ramp at a rest stop along I-75. From the overlook, a view of the watery landscape and tree islands can be seen in the distance. These tree islands are an oasis for many animals and are being protected and restored by FWC using prescribed fire and removing invasive plants. Birds find nest sites and perches for resting or hunting while alligators, snakes and turtles lay their eggs safe from the threat of rising water. **FW**



Top to bottom: Babcock Webb WMA's ADA-accessible shooting range section; a wheelchair or walker can easily be maneuvered inside a blind at Andrews WMA; Everglades WMA provides a newly constructed overlook at a rest stop along I-75.

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